ESSAI

Volume 5 Article 26

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation
Hutson, Shaina (2007) "Gender Oppression and Discrimination in South Africa," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 26.
Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/26

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Gender Oppression and Discrimination in South Africa

by Shaina Hutson

(History 2235)

During Apartheid in South Africa, the country was a collaboration of racism and sexism with the government striving day in and day out to keep the country in such a state. The gender discrimination in South Africa is deeply rooted in the ethnic traditions of the multi-cultural communities, as well as by the compliance of women themselves. Each culture's values perceive women as inferior to men (Meer, 1992). Because of these cultural traditions, compliance, and the government, gender equality in South Africa has been an ongoing battle, and will continue to be throughout the twenty-first century. This will be further explored first through a look into the history of women in South Africa, then how these women are perceived today, and finally what has been done and what is currently being done in different organizations throughout South Africa and the rest of the world, and the questions that may arise from such organizations attempting to change such ancient traditions.

In Western terms, Africa has always been impoverished and thriving with conflict whether it be between tribes, between husband and wife, or between citizens and the government. However, most of the conflict involves the discrimination and oppression of women. In pre-colonial South Africa, women actually had status and authority because they were the main agricultural producers. However, once farming became less important in colonial times, women lost their status and authority (Baden, 1993). The establishment of commercialized agriculture left women without a real place in society as their main role up to that point had been as agricultural producers (Anunobi, 2003). Colonialists changed the well known laws and wrote down the new ones. The written laws gave women fewer rights than men; such as the fact that a woman's access to land depended solely on her relationship to a man (Baden, 1993). Also, because of the time period during which colonial rule was set in place, colonial masters in Africa were often much less reasonable than traditional African societies (Anunobi, 2003). Traditional African culture had clearly stipulated the different roles of men and women in society (Bwakali, 2001). For instance, polygamy is still a common practice in Africa (Gaba, 1997). Because of the rules of polygamy, many women end up being at the beck and call of just one man. If one woman cannot have a child, her husband will marry another woman for the sake of carrying on the family lines. This is just something that is known in South African society and something that women grow up needing to expect. Boys and Girls grew up knowing what was required for them in society. Boys grew up knowing they had to be strong and wise in order to take care of and provide for their wives. Similarly, girls grew up knowing that they had to be hardworking and submissive in order to appeal to a man as a wife. Women were victims of injustice not because of what society did to them, but because of what society did *not* do to them (Bwakali, 2001); Meaning that if society does not change, then it is up to the women to change society. Because women continued to conform to the social and societal norms with which they were brought up, society had no reason to change. Only when a culture gives "society" a reason to change, will it finally be altered. Because of the norms of society, it was not up to women to make their lives successful; rather it was up to their future husbands. As Bwakali states, "As boys herded their livestock, girls would fetch firewood and water. As the boys hunted, older girls would perfect their cooking prowess. Then marriage would come along and young men would grow into husbands that fit the society's description of a husband. The same applied to young women; Thus would their lives be lived; in this age-old pattern more according to the norms of the society and less according to

individual aspirations." (2001). Society mattered more to South Africans than did individual aspirations. Once again, without individual aspirations or any want to change, no change will ever occur. In the 1930s, women began to move to urban areas in search of work. However, laws and regulations made it very difficult. The most common ways for women to make money were through brewing beer, domestic work, and casual work on farms owned by whites (Baden, 1999). Women struggled to enter the work force, which in turn shocked many as women were (for once) attempting to do something different in society, rather than conforming to societal norms.

In post-apartheid South Africa, despite the change in government and the writing of a Constitution, oppression towards women is still highly rampant; in fact it seems to be growing, not only in South Africa but in the rest of the world as well. Many radical feminists see the family situations as the basis for oppression. However, most women see their families as a source of emotional strength and they value their roles as mothers and homemakers (Meer, 1992). Unfortunately, because of their roles as mothers and homemakers, and because of women's economic handicaps, they are not allowed to make important economic decisions. More tragic is that the men tend to be lazy or just plain indifferent, and they lack the time and desire to make wise decisions; therefore poor decisions are made (Bwakali, 2001). Without economic power, the women have no power. Their separation from such power makes South African women unambitious and more value-centered than men. Also, they are much more dependent on the family for their basic well-being. However, most South African women accept their subservience and don't feel a sense of oppression. In addition, despite the fact that they are the most oppressed group in the country, suffering effects of both racial and gender-based discrimination, women do not feel alienated by men (Meer, 1992). Modernization, however, has not exactly been valuable to most unfortunate African women. As Anunobi mentions, "In Africa, where traditional cultures sometimes portray women's organizations and productions techniques that bind women together, urbanization and the spread of nuclear families have deprived women of the organizational establishments they had enjoyed in the past" (64). Without the ability to come together as one union, women have been unable to make themselves successfully heard as a group. Conventional wisdom in Africa has rid itself of the "gender dimension" and has adopted a "gender-neutral" approach. For instance, the democratic process has been treated as a gender-neutral process in which men and women have equal access to materials and opportunities to enhance their participation. However, again due to the gender-neutral approach, all political services are held in a public arena; one from which women are excluded as a result of traditional patriarchal social divisions (Anunobi, 2003). So even as conventional wisdom tries to give African women more of a voice and more of a handle in society, traditional viewpoints remain overpowering and overbearing, and therefore women lose the voice that such modern ideas may have briefly given them.

In addition to the lack of a voice in political actions, women also are still untrained and remain excluded from the job market. Those women who are employed only find employment with the lowest paying wages. Moreover, 57 percent of all employed South African women work as domestic servants or agricultural laborers, further leaving them out of unionization and subjecting them to the urges of their employers with regards to wages and working conditions (Meer, 1992). Since these women can only get certain jobs, however, they are forced to accept whatever ludicrous conditions are thrown at them in order to keep the jobs they can get.

Another huge problem in South Africa is the widespread AIDS epidemic that shows no sign of abating. An estimated 1 in 10 uninfected young women in South Africa can expect to become infected each year. South Africa has the steepest statistics of reported women becoming infected with HIV each year, and has the highest rise of all sub-Saharan African countries. Moreover, HIV tests are often inaccessible, counseling is difficult to find, and treatment is nowhere to be found for the women of South Africa. When the greatest risk of infection is young women between the ages of 15 and 25, something needs to be done for these women to ensure that they get the counseling and

treatment that is necessary; especially because (as a conservative estimate) a vaccine is at least ten years from production (Susser and Stein, 2000).

A lot of the problem in South Africa lies within the African women themselves. Because the young men played such a crucial role in the collapse of apartheid, they are eager to collect their dues, and the women understand and respect such a notion. Therefore, the constraints that the post-apartheid society has to give priority to the full employment of young men are supported by the women in South Africa who believe that the young men need the jobs more than they do as women. The expectation that the young men have to collect such dues from society as a result of the end of apartheid is unmatched by women. Therefore, as the post-apartheid state is under pressure to develop local black skills, it will be easier for them to concentrate more on the male component. This concentration will be done obviously at the expense of women; however it will also be done with the cooperation of these women (Meer, 1992).

Despite the segregation and oppression that still occurs, the post-apartheid system in South Africa is dedicated to equality, which is one of the basic principles of the new constitution. The constitution guarantees equality for women and allows for affirmative action to address both gender and race inequality. President Nelson Mandela said, "freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression, … unless we see in visible and practical terms that the condition of the women of our country has radically changed for the better, and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society" (Baden, 1993). Mandela, South Africa's biggest proprietor in the fight against apartheid is absolutely dedicated to the people of his country. He believes in absolute equality and wants women to have the same rights and the same power as men do in order to participate in society as well as in politics. Sadly, however, despite some progress made toward them, Mandela's wishes and ideas have yet to really take hold. In fact, women are still treated as "minors" if they marry under the traditional African law. The age of majority in South Africa is 21, however according to traditional law, married women are considered permanent minors and under the control of their husbands. As one woman so tragically explains, "My husband spends all of the money he earns on other women rather than on our five children. When I complain, he threatens to divorce me." In addition, traditional law says that women have no rights to inheritance. All property, the home and everything in it goes to the husband's family. The widow gets nothing and is put under guardianship of the husband's family. One widow explained that even though all the household property was hers and she paid for the funeral expenses, her late husband's family received everything. She did not oppose them because she knew she would be in a lot of 'trouble'. Women do have access to lawyers, but many women do not know their rights and they would more than likely be ostracized by their family if they took any legal action. Moreover, most women can not afford to hire a lawyer, and all the judges are men. So even if a woman did have the money for a lawyer, chances are good she would not get anywhere with a male judge anyway. The article explains, "What assistance is available from the government does not cover her defense nor food security" ("South Africa," 1999). These widows have no place to go. Between being regarded as minors and being placed under guardianship of the husband's family, what is she to do without risking hatred and derision from her family as well as her husband's family? The solution to gender inequality in South Africa lies solely with the African woman herself.

Much has been done for the women of South Africa. However, some things must be kept in mind in order to understand why more has not been done. The first is that the context of gender equality is just as important as the content of it. Also, Western nations need to comprehend the fact that South Africa and their nation are in different places and times. This is so very important. Until this fact is recognized, Western ideals will cease to help the women of South Africa end the oppression that they have dealt with for centuries. Finally, people naturalize the differences between men and women, but the form of the naturalization is culturally viable. Ending the oppression of

women is highly dependent upon culture and the women wishing to change their culture and their traditions (Bwakali, 2001).

Despite cultural and traditional conflicts, women have still made quite the effort to end oppression and bring in Nelson Mandela's ideas to end inequality. During apartheid, women played a part in different organizations which struggled against the tight regime of apartheid. Repression increased during the 1950s and pass laws which prevented movement into other cities were extended to women. In the 1960s, liberation movements were banned, and women's organizations grew weak in the following years. However, mass resistance against oppression grew in the 1970s. Women in the trade unions began to take up gender issues such as maternity leave. In the early 1980s, women came together to form different organizations which worked alongside male based community organizations. Despite the mixing with the male organizations, however, women held powerful, important leadership roles within the mixed-sex organizations (Baden, 1999).

Black South African women have finally come to understand their own potential and have laid claim to their own freedoms (Meer, 1992). During the 1980s and 1990s, many debates arose regarding the struggle for female equality possibly interrupting the struggle to end apartheid. Some people felt that specific women's organizations would weaken the broader struggle, whereas others felt that without the special attention, women's needs would get lost in the mix. In 1990, women in exile and activists inside South Africa met for the first time to discuss such issues; and in 1992, women from across multiple political, racial, and other divides came together to form the Women's National Coalition (WNC). The coalition drew up the Women's Charter of Effective Equality which was based on the stipulations of women in the grassroots as well as in different women's organizations, to ensure that women's issues were addressed in the writing of the constitution in post-apartheid South Africa (Baden, 1993). In addition, the Women's National Coalition gave women the resources to participate in negotiations, and later, lobby (successfully) for cabinet-level status. More importantly, it brought gender into the mainstream at a critical political moment. The WNC supplied a platform to make the new constitution "gender sensitive" and organizers gathered women from all political, religious, social, and professional organizations to deliberate their inclusion in the new constitution. Thus, women from all regions and walks of life came together to reform the understanding of their subjectivity as fully human and equal citizens, and outlined terms for new gender principles to guide South Africa toward gender justice (Hill, 2004). Leslie Hill states, "As a result of WNC's work, South Africa's Bill of Rights and constitution ensure women's rights, prohibit sex discrimination, and promote women's equality. These documents establish gender equality as a fundamental value of the post-apartheid society. They offer a vision of, legitimate the goal of, and provoke debate on a national consensus for improving women's status. Formal provisions for political and legal equality in the constitution make the state accountable for dismantling gender discrimination. Further, they provide the "enabling framework" through which to install "gender machinery" to promote and monitor progress toward gender equity" (Hill 117).

Many other organizations are attempting to help South Africa as well. For instance, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now trying to find ways of empowering women both politically and intellectually. Sounds quite commendable, however, many of their efforts are destroying as they are building. Some of the NGOs only help women's groups that have a certain number of members or with certain projects (Bwakali, 2001). Basically, if they do not do what the NGOs want, then they do not get what they want. It is all very counter-productive. The different women's organizations have their own agendas that do not always match those of the NGOs. Without parallel viewpoints, the chances of accomplishing much of anything are slim to none.

Women have had a long and assiduous struggle towards their equality in South Africa. Moreover, they still have a long road ahead of them (as do women in most countries of the world) to ensure that their freedoms and liberties are not withheld any longer. There are great organizations in place to help South African women achieve their goal of absolute equality, but they need to believe

that they deserve it and they need to let go of their old colonial traditions in order to make their voices heard in the independent society in which they now live.

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